

Commissioner's Weekly Field Memo
Friday, March 8, 2013

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Notes from Commissioner Gist

1. PARCC Consortium provides information on new state assessments

One of the priorities in our strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*, is to implement high-quality state assessments aligned with internationally benchmarked standards. We are moving forward steadily with that initiative, as we are implementing the Common Core State Standards over this year and next year and as we prepare for our new state assessments in 2014-15. To help us transition to the new assessments, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness or College and Careers (PARCC) released a set of planning documents on Tuesday (March 5). We sent these documents to you earlier this week, and they all are posted on the PARCC website, at:

<http://parcconline.org/assessment-administration-guidance>

As a member of the PARCC Governing Board, I am confident that the PARCC will be an excellent assessment, closely aligned with what our students are learning in class every day. Because PARCC will be a computer-based assessment, students, families, and teachers will receive PARCC results shortly after testing and teachers will be able to use these results to guide instruction. Additionally, PARCC will be well integrated into daily classroom instruction. For example, some teachers could use the PARCC assessments as part of their course of instruction – as mid-semester exams or end-of-course exams.

As you can see in the materials the PARCC Consortium posted this week, schools will administer the PARCC assessment during two testing “windows” during the school year – the first in early spring, the second near the end of the school year. The PARCC assessments will require slightly more testing sessions than the current NECAP testing: 9 PARCC sessions compared with 6 or 8 NECAP sessions, depending on the tested grade. Ultimately, the total number of hours of PARCC testing during the school year will be 8 to 10 hours per tested grade – approximately 1 percent of the instructional time during the school year.

It is important to note that under PARCC grades 9 and 10 will participate in statewide assessments for the first time. Students in these grade levels will find that their assessments align better with their coursework; for example, students will take geometry assessments during the year they are studying geometry, not at the beginning of the next school year. Under PARCC, students will be tested on writing at each grade level (as opposed to only three grade levels for NECAP), which we believe places a proper emphasis on the importance of writing as part of the assessment of literacy knowledge and skills.

To administer PARCC assessments on computers, schools and districts are investing in tablets or laptops. The cost will vary depending on decisions that you will make: How many devices per student? Will the testing windows be one week, two weeks, three, or four? Although PARCC recommends a ratio of at least 1 device for every 2 students – that means device-per-student in the *largest tested grade*, not in the school as a whole. In a high-school, for example, a 1:2 ratio would translate to about one device for every 8 students in the school. The calculator tool that PARCC has provided will help you estimate the number of devices that you will need to successfully administer the PARCC assessments. Of course these laptops and tablets that schools and districts are buying or leasing will advance teaching and learning in many ways. In addition to their value in administering computer-based assessments, these tools will provide our students with virtual learning opportunities and with access to high-quality instructional materials.

Data we have collected at RIDE through our own PARCC-readiness survey show us a wide range of readiness across the state, with about 10 LEAs fully ready at this time and others with only a few or no PARCC-ready devices at present. To help ensure that all LEAs are ready to administer the PARCC assessments in 2015, RIDE has negotiated a statewide master price agreement through which you can purchase or lease PARCC-ready devices, software, insurance, maintenance, and support at a reasonable, fixed price of about \$300 per year per device. As we move forward with our Wireless Classroom Initiative, financed by a \$20-million technology bond, we are also investing funds toward expanding the bandwidth available to all Rhode Island schools, which will enable more efficient administration of the PARCC assessments over time.

I know we will have many conversations about PARCC over the next two years as we get ready to administer these assessments. Along with many other members of the RIDE team – including our Offices of Data, Analysis & Research; Instruction, Assessment, and Curriculum; Multiple Pathways; and Statewide Efficiencies – we are ready to work with you to ensure a smooth transition to PARCC.

2. Rhode Island recognized for management of Race to the Top

Following the very positive Race to the Top Year 2 Report from the U.S. Department of Education and the Year 3 On-site Review that a team from the U.S. Department of Education conducted last month (February 11 – 14), we all can be proud of the excellent progress we have made under Race to the Top in Rhode Island. As you may recall, Education Secretary Arne

Duncan has recognized Rhode Island as one of three states making excellent progress under this federal grant.

In light of this, many other Race to the Top states have been looking to Rhode Island to learn from our best practices. Last spring, a team from the Reform Support Network, which the U.S. Department of Education has established to provide technical assistance and resources to the Race to the Top states, interviewed staff members here at RIDE about our work, and the Network has prepared two case studies about Rhode Island: one focusing on our EdStat process for monitoring progress under the grant and the other on our Collaborative Learning for Outcomes process, through which we bring LEAs together in teams to develop strategies and practices in common. I am attaching these two case studies to this Field Memo (Collaborative Learning for Outcomes; EdStat in Rhode Island).

Clearly, we are succeeding in management of our Race to the Top grant because of the outstanding partnerships between RIDE and the LEAs across our state. I am deeply thankful for your commitment to this initiative, which has brought invaluable resources to Rhode Island and is helping us work together to transform education and to advance student achievement.

3. Superintendents reminded of regulations on school year, school days

I appreciate your forbearance during this week's winter storm, which has added yet another challenge as you strive to meet the requirements of state law and to provide a full calendar of excellent instruction for your students. We all understand that it is essential that our students and staff members are able to travel safely to and from school every day. At RIDE, we have been working closely with Governor Chafee's Office, the Lieutenant Governor's Office, and the Emergency Management Agency to provide you with timely information about the weather and about likely travel conditions during school hours. When you weigh your decisions about closing schools, delayed openings, and early dismissals, keep in mind that all LEAs must complete a calendar with 180 days of instruction. As a reminder, here are a few of the points on school calendars that I sent to you in a Field Memo last month (February 15):

- You must provide a schedule that includes 180 school days per school year. You cannot meet this 180-day requirement by adding hours onto already scheduled school day. (16-2-2)
- Schools must be open for at least three hours of instructional time for the day to be considered an official school day. (G-4-8)
- If you delay the opening of school for more than one hour, the day will not count toward the required 180 days of school. (G-4-8)
- You can make up school days by converting scheduled professional-development days to school days or by adding days to your calendar during vacation weeks, on Good Friday, on Saturdays, or after the originally scheduled last day of school.

- If any of your schools is closed because of an emergency that threatens the health of children or the well-being of the community, your school committee may ask for an emergency reduction of the school year. (16-2-3)

I have been engaged in discussions with the leadership of the Rhode Island School Superintendents Association about the application of these statutes and regulations. I want us to work together to review these laws, to propose changes if needed, and to ensure that these requirements protect the safety of our students and staff members while ensuring that we provide a full school year of excellent instruction to all students.

4. Board of Education to hold its initial meeting on Monday

Monday (March 11) will mark the beginning of a new phase of school governance in Rhode Island, as the newly constituted Board of Education holds its first meeting. The 11-member Board of Education, established in law last year, has taken on the powers and duties of the former Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Governors for Higher Education. Over the past two months, I have had many meetings and conversations with Board Chair Eva-Marie Mancuso, and she and I see an exciting opportunity to build even stronger partnerships between our PK-12 education system and our colleges and universities, particularly regarding college and career-ready standards, workforce development, and data sharing. As Chair Mancuso said earlier this month in her confirmation hearing before the Senate:

The challenge for us all is to find common ground to move this mission forward, quickly but with a conscious understanding that human behavior takes time to change. We don't have time for years of study nor is progress measured by numbers alone but if we listen to each other, keep our focus on the mission and goal we will be successful. We have to be successful, because education is our opportunity for prosperity. We all have a stake in the outcome, so we all have to join together to find the solutions.

I look forward to working with Chair Mancuso and the other Board members on the many important issues before us as we strive to make our schools – including our colleges! – America's best.

Note: The Board will meet at CCRI Warwick, Room 4090, at 5:30 p.m.

5. ASCD provides school-improvement tool; Cumberland school nominated for ASCD award

I was glad to be able to join colleagues at RIMLE and Rhode Island – ASCD last week for a good discussion about a number of issues, including the ASCD work around creating “whole-child education,” which the ASCD defines as “the development of children who are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged within a sustainable approach to education and

community engagement.” This whole-child approach aligns well with many of the priorities and strategies in our strategic plan, *Transforming Education in Rhode Island*, including our emphasis on making our schools safe and healthy environments for teaching and learning.

At the meeting, we discussed the free online ASCD School Improvement Tool, which the organization launched last year. This tool is designed to help schools conduct a needs assessment to evaluate strengths and weaknesses – a particularly important step when embarking on the development of a school-improvement plan. The tool encompasses a number of elements, including school climate and culture, curriculum and instruction, leadership, family and community engagement, professional development and staff capacity, assessments, and “the ability to provide and sustain a whole-child approach to education.” You can access the tool here:

<http://sitool.ascd.org/Default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2f>

Each year, the ASCD presents a Vision in Action award to a school that has “gone beyond a vision for educating the whole child to actions that result in learners who are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, civically active, artistically engaged, prepared for economic self-sufficiency, and ready for the world beyond formal schooling.” The **Ashton School**, in Cumberland, is the Rhode Island – ASCD nominee for the 2013 award. Congratulations to the students, teachers, and school leaders in Cumberland and at the Ashton School, and good luck in pursuit of this national recognition!

From RIDE

Data and Information:

6. RIDE to hold focus groups on middle-school eTranscripts

RIDE is developing a middle-school eTranscript as part of our State Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) grant. In order to ensure that this eTranscript meets the needs of districts and middle schools, we will be holding focus groups next week. We are seeking input from middle-school guidance staff, middle-school administrators, technology directors, curriculum directors, district administrators, from the leadership of RIMLE, and from any other staff members who can provide feedback regarding middle-school eTranscripts. We will hold these focus groups on:

Tuesday (March 12)

9 – 11 a.m.

Northern Rhode Island Collaborative

640 George Washington Highway, Suite 200

Lincoln 02865

Friday (March 15)

9 – 11 a.m.
Middletown Administration Building
26 Oliphant Lane
Middletown 02842

1 – 3 p.m.
Rhode Island Higher Education Assistance Authority
560 Jefferson Blvd., Suite 100
Warwick 02886

Please sign up for these focus groups by going to the RIDE Workshop Calendar, at www.ride.ri.gov. The calendar is located in the lower-right-hand corner. If you have any questions, please contact Lee Rabbitt (lee.rabbitt@ride.ri.gov).

Educator Evaluations:

7. RIDE to hold training sessions for evaluators this summer

Throughout the summer, RIDE will offer new training sessions for personnel evaluating teachers and personnel evaluating building administrators. The 2013 summer training sessions are the next phase in the training continuum for evaluators that began with the 2012 summer academies. Topics will be prioritized based on feedback we collect from evaluators, including information we collect through the statewide evaluation surveys.

The training schedule for personnel evaluating teachers will include 1 ½ days of in-person training and approximately 4 hours of online modules that can be completed independently or in small groups. The condensed training schedule respects the significant commitment evaluators have made to date while providing ongoing opportunities for calibration, support, and collaboration. The schedule for personnel evaluating building administrators will be similar, with 1 day of in-person training and approximately 4 hours of online modules.

Please note that a more robust training that will mirror the 2012 summer academies will be available for new evaluators. We will provide specific dates, locations, and registration information for the 2013 summer training sessions in an upcoming Field Memo.

8. RIDE offers new classroom-observation calibration tool

Personnel evaluating teachers in schools implementing the Rhode Island Model have access to a calibration tool that is designed to help evaluators monitor their scoring accuracy. The calibration is part of the Framework for Teaching Proficiency System, and the tool includes two 15-minute, master-scored videos that take approximately 1 hour to complete. The calibration tool provides instant feedback and expert rationale, along with recommendations, when appropriate, for improving accuracy. Leadership teams may find this to be meaningful

professional development. Evaluators can access this tool by logging in through our RIDemap portal, at:

<https://ridemap.ride.ri.gov/default.aspx>

9. RIDE encourages LEAs to set appropriate deadlines for Student Learning Objectives

Student Learning Objectives are designed to be long-term academic goals that can be set for the school year or for an interval of instruction appropriate to the teaching assignment (e.g., a single semester for a semester-length course). Requiring teachers to submit the results of their Student Learning Objectives significantly early (e.g., two or three months before the end of the school year) can be problematic. If the deadline alters the previously identified length of instruction, the targets may no longer be appropriate and the value of the Student Learning Objective as an accurate measure of teacher effectiveness may be decreased because students and teachers will have less time to demonstrate learning. We therefore encourage LEAs to set deadlines for the submission of Student Learning Objective results that align with the previously defined interval of instruction.

Assessments:

10. RIDE to launch Test Construction Tool for interim assessments

RIDE is pleased to announce the upcoming launch of the Test Construction Tool (TCT) for the Rhode Island Interim Assessments Project during the week beginning March 18. Using the TCT, educators will be able to create their own assessments, based on particular standards. The tool will contain item banks initially populated by ELA/literacy and mathematics items aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Science and social studies items, aligned to their respective standards, will be added throughout the next school year. Similar to the fixed-form assessments, the assessments created through the TCT will be available both online and paper-based, and the assessments will have an array of accommodations as well. Guidance and training information on using the TCT will be posted, at:

www.ride.ri.gov/Assessment/Interim.aspx

The TCT will be accessible through the interim assessments module on the Instructional Management System (IMS). Please review the technical requirements for both the IMS and the Interim Assessment System to ensure access to the system for all users:

www.ride.ri.gov/Division-EEIE/DOCS/IMS/IMS_Technical_Requirements_Overview_for_RIDE.pdf

and:

[www.ride.ri.gov/Assessment/DOCS/Interim/Interim Assessments Technical Requirements.pdf](http://www.ride.ri.gov/Assessment/DOCS/Interim/Interim_Assessments_Technical_Requirements.pdf).

Technology:

11. Work with vendors on Wireless Classroom Initiative must wait until RIDE posts approved vendor list

The RIDE Wireless Classroom Initiative (WCI) has continued its forward progress since the Rollout Meeting last week. As promised, electronic copies of the presentation have been posted on our website, at <http://www.ride.ri.gov/RIDE/docs/techbond>, along with instructions to LEAs in preparation for next steps.

Please note that the Vendor MPA has not yet been released, pending completion of state procurement steps by vendors, and therefore any contact with vendors *must be deferred* until the list is posted and made public. We have been informed that LEAs are hearing from vendors who are indicating that they have been approved. Be advised that vendors are prohibited from working on this initiative until such time as the MPA is officially posted. We will notify you when that occurs. Once we post the MPA, we will be providing Vendor Instructions and a Site Survey template, which vendors will be required to use.

In the meantime, we have been pouring over LEA technology plans, scheduling and conducting interviews with district IT managers, preparing the vendor site-survey template and implementation checklist, working with LEAs that have E-Rate filing challenges, and answering questions e-mailed to wirelessinitiative@ride.ri.gov. In the upcoming weeks, we will be reaching out to LEAs to set up interviews and we will be working with schools and vendors once the MPA is posted. We are working to keep you informed, so keep those questions coming into our e-mail box.

Diploma System:

12. LEAs can apply to participate in 2013-14 initiative on proficiency-based graduation

The RIDE Office of Multiple Pathways in partnership with the Center for Collaborative Education Quality Performance Assessment Program are sponsoring the Strengthening Proficiency-Based Graduation (SPBG) Initiative. This initiative aims to provide two cohorts of schools with professional development and inclusion in a state network to develop and implement high-quality, local, common performance assessments as part of meeting the requirements of our Diploma System. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation and the Rhode Island Foundation provide funding for this initiative.

The application process for the second cohort is now open. A project flyer with the details of the project and the application are available on the RIDE website, at:

[http://www.ride.ri.gov/OMP/Secondary/default.aspx#Perfromance Assessments](http://www.ride.ri.gov/OMP/Secondary/default.aspx#Perfromance_Assessments).

If you are interested in this opportunity, please follow the application directions and submit your application by **April 15**.

If you have any questions about this opportunity, please e-mail Cali Cornell, at cali.cornell@ride.ri.gov.